

## **Corralling Life through Photography / Angélica Abelleira**

**Vida Yovanovich depicts time and the deterioration it causes. Her photographs express both a radical melancholy and the conviction that “we must assume our doubts and fears.” Angélica Abelleira reminds us of the photograph of the abandoned train station and the words of Juan Ramón Jiménez’s poem: “The dawn experiences the sorrow of arriving by train to a station that is not ones own.” We add our voice to the tribute that the elderly women and men of Mexico have paid this photographer, of facial expressions and gentle desperations.**

It’s curious how we all—or the majority of us—tend to slot other people into categories. With her painted nails and her *look*, like that of a pregnant matron, Vida Yovanovich was too easily grouped in with the photographers of flowers and landscapes. No one expected anything different in her professional career. But when the group of artists who then formed the Mexican Council for Photography saw her series *Carriles (Rails)* in 1983 and 1984, they sensed that this tall, curly-haired woman and her camera were setting out on a long journey which would give face to the forsaken and return again and again to the themes of time, rejection and how the erosion of the passing years is carved so deeply into the skin that it reaches the soul.

Deserted railway stations and portraits of people waiting for a train that may never arrive characterized the first exhibition of scenes of desolation to be presented by Vida Yovanovich, the young Cuban child who was already seeing the world through a camera given to her at home, but with a vision honed in Mexico, at first through commercial children’s fashion photography and later through her deep commitment to photography that confronts and corrals us, through self-portraits where her face is flooded with fears and through installations that question our doubts and as yet unresolved interiority.

Vida Yovanovich was born in Cuba but she might have first come into this world under the skies of a thousand other places. She left the island at the age of seven and has lived in Mexico ever since. Her parents were from Yugoslavia and fled to Cuba to escape the war. This experience left an indelible mark on Yovanovich. Her father is currently writing his memoirs and her mother still allows herself to be photographed for Vida’s series that illustrate the always painful but sometimes tender triad of time, wear and abandonment.

First she became interested in the trains; next came the discarded dolls; and the plastic faces used as amulets on garbage trucks. These she transformed into portraits of young “mothers” caring for their even younger brothers and sisters or their own children without ever experiencing the sheer joy of just being a child. Then Yovanovich the lioness leaped straight from that forced maternity into old age, landing unpoetically in the midst of her vision of women with white hair, wrinkled skin and a gaze that looks both forward and backward.

Over the course of several years, she paid a large number of visits to a small nursing home behind the Basilica of Guadalupe, where she observed, kept silent, wept, talked, socialized and, finally, snapped the portraits of elderly women making up her series *Prison of Dreams*: her loving and by no means complacent reflection on a vital period of life. The series has traveled around the world (it is currently being shown in Vienna, having just been on exhibition in Paris) and been published in book form (a co-publication of Casa de las Imágenes, Centro de la Imagen and the National Council of the Arts, with a foreword by Elena Poniatowska), having repercussions in many artistic centers where it has been widely commented on and admired.

Influenced by the photography of Graciela Iturbide and Duane Michals, and a great admirer of the work of Pedro Meyer and Gerardo Suter, Vida Yovanovich has always been drawn to the idea of entering interior spaces where one feels protected. In this show, she has championed the reign of light: contours, shafts and arches that enter without permission through the windows and curtains of rooms where elderly women converse, arrange their long hair, chase away pigeons and spirits; where they bathe, get angry, dream next to their snapshots, sleep next to their oxygen tanks and wait for... what? We will never know.

But living among them like a ghost, Yovanovich presents a portrait of herself that betrays the passage of time, devoid of the poetry that some use to beautify old age, unembellished and unretouched.

When she was awarded the 1990 Casa de las Américas Prize in Cuba for *Prison of Dreams*, Yovanovich was asked why her photographs did not show “the soft aspects of old age.” “What happened to the positive view that we never saw?” asked Graciela Iturbide, one of the jurors on this occasion. The observation had a profound effect on Yovanovich. She hurried home, cut out scraps of paper bearing the words “positive side” and “old age” and used them to cover the walls of her studio. This led her to

photograph the portrait of the elderly woman reclining on a chair, offering a grimace of old age or of pain, crowned by a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*.

Yovanovich could do nothing else. “You cannot photograph or sculpt or paint what doesn’t exist inside of you. I’m always on the path of abandonment, rejection and death. Not long ago I tried to give myself a break while on a trip to Europe and started doing landscapes. At first it was nice to discover myself in this new phase but eventually I started looking for a dead tree. This is when I realized that there’s no turning back, that we must assume our fears and our doubts. Because fears do not go away; they are only transformed when you confront them and they take on real dimension when you can process them. In my case, old age still distresses me, but I have assumed and accepted it. People in general have a hard time with growing old. And life is even more unjust to women because gray hair and a few extra pounds are not well looked upon. What is ‘interesting’ in a man is ‘unkempt’ in a woman and proof that she is no longer of any value. It isn’t just. Mexico is a country that pays little attention to the elderly, and medicine may allow old people to live longer, but society doesn’t offer them a decent and productive life. Youth beats out age. It is important to construct, with actions, ‘a society for all ages,’ as is being publicized in certain parts of the world,” she comments.

Vida Yovanovich is passionate about self-portraiture—indeed, she included many self-portraits in *Prison*—and has translated this interest into installations such as *Spent Time* and *Up Front* where she bombards the spectator with images that have no beginning and no end, while questioning our reluctance to accept the passing of the years. “I like work that traps and corrals the viewer. Finally, the artist has the chance to confront the spectator, and this is something I do not intend to miss out on,” she says smiling. This professional of the lens, who learned all the trade secrets in order to transgress her own schemes, continues: “You cannot break the rules before knowing the trade. For me, photography is not only about composing but also about seeing the light, being meticulous about developing and printing. A lot of young people today want to start out by breaking the rules, but they have not yet finished climbing the rungs of the trade, they haven’t taken the time.”

And this is the key to Vida Yovanovich: time. She captures it and it is given to her. Like the seven-year period she took to forge relationships with those elderly women, to become one of them, to become transparent and afford herself the

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opportunity to *steal* certain images in order to help us all face our anxieties and fears with a fresh outlook.

Angélica Abelleira, “Fotografiar para acorrallar la vida,” *La Jornada* (February 27, 2000): 13.

Translated by Michelle Suderman.